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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the outcomes of a longitudinal study that investigated whether significant change has occurred in the number of Louisiana students in general education, resource, and separation placements from 1990 to 1999; whether significant differences in placement by age category have continued; and which school systems show a tendency toward more or less inclusion of students and how they compare on identified variables. Student demographic data for the study were generated from a statewide student database, using the federal reporting data of December 1 for comparison. The study was limited to school-aged students. Results from the study indicate no dramatic shifts in placement trends in Louisiana over the ten-year period. A comparison of the average percent of students in the three placement over the last four years to the previous six showed no real change in general education placements and an approximate 5 percent decrease in separate special education class placements with a subsequent 5 percent increase in resource special education class placements. This indicates there has been change, albeit in smaller increments than presumed or desired and not in all areas. Also, the tendency to increase separate placement as the students age continues to be clearly evident. (Contains 12 references.) (CR)

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The More Things Change: A Longitudinal Study of Placements of Special Education Students in Louisiana

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The More Things Change: A Longitudinal Study of Placements of Special Education Students in Louisiana

Background

In 1995 The Arc published the *1995 Report Card on Inclusion in Education of Students with Mental Retardation* (Davis, 1995). This report showed that Louisiana ranked forty-fifth during the 1989-90 school year and was still at the same rank in 1992-93. The *Seventeenth Annual Report to Congress* (1996) indicated that for the 1992-93 school year, Louisiana's data showed that 43% of students with disabilities were in separate class placements when compared to a national average of 23%. In reviewing the national patterns of inclusion, Carlson (1996) showed that Louisiana's pattern of inclusion was the direct inverse of the nation as a whole. Special educators in Louisiana, however, claimed that special education was more inclusionary than these reports and data indicated.

These discrepant views set the stage for a study by Durrett and Luster (1997) that examined Louisiana's placement data for students with disabilities for the period 1990-95. Results of that study indicated that placements of students with disabilities did remain essentially unchanged during the six year period and were consistent with the national reports, despite vocal support by school system personnel for inclusionary practices and implementation of a statewide systems change initiative in 1993.

Introduction

Based on the continuing national attention toward the greater inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classes and Louisiana's past history, the current study was undertaken. It was intended to follow-up on the 1997 study and extend the scope of examination.

In the original study, Durrett and Luster asked five questions of the data for the period 1990-95. They are paraphrased here:

1. Was there a significant change in percent of students served in various settings?

2. Were there significant differences in placements based on age?

3. Were there differences in the placements when comparing state and federal definitions?

4. Were there differences in school districts implementing change strategies compared to the state?

5. Were there significant differences in placements based on categories of disability?

The results are summarized as follows:

1. No significant change in the percent of students served in general education, resource special education class or separate special education class occurred over the six-year period. However, the data did indicate that the percent of students in general education actually *declined* from 38.8% in 1990 to 34.3% in 1995.

2. The analysis based on age categories and placements indicated significant differences between elementary and adult aged students. The greatest percentage (49.7%) of elementary aged students were served in general education, while about half (25.5%) as many adult aged students were in general education placement.

3. Differences in the definitions used at the state and federal level for general education, resource special education, and separate class placement were cited as a reason for Louisiana's apparently high percentage of students in separate placements. A comparison indicated no significant differences based on the definition of separate special education; however, significant differences were found when comparing general education and resource settings. The overall results were "the state definition column reveals an increase in general education placements, decrease in separate class placements, and essentially no change in resource placements. These state results do show a difference from federal data that is toward more inclusion" (Durrett & Luster, 1997, p. 7).

4. A comparison of four school districts - two that were part of the systems change initiative and two that, by self report, were using inclusionary practices - was conducted to determine whether they differed from the state as a whole. The outcome of this examination indicated "that systems using systems change and/or inclusionary practices have a lower percent of students placed in separate classes with a higher percent in resource classes" (Durrett & Luster, 1997, p. 8).

5. The final analysis of the 1997 report was to determine whether differences in placements could be identified within categories of disabilities. That is, were there changes across time in the placements of students with mental disabilities, specific learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, and speech/language disabilities. The results revealed that while some variations had occurred, no statistical or practical differences were indicated. Students classified as speech impaired usually were in general education classes, while most students classified as mentally disabled were in separate classes.

The authors concluded that, "The results of this study tend to support the reports that Louisiana's separate class placement patterns are apparently more restrictive than those reported for the nation as a whole" (Ibid, p. 10).

Purpose of the Study

Four years have passed since the original data were examined. Changes, both at the national and state level, have occurred. Inclusion continues to be a byword and goal, albeit in various forms, throughout the special education community.

The 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) strengthened the inclination to defining the least restrictive environment (LRE) for educating students with disabilities as the general education classroom. Yell and Drasgow (1999) wrote, "All students with disabilities have presumptive right to be educated in integrated settings. The LRE mandate in the IDEA sets forth a clear preference for these settings, and the courts have repeatedly indicated the importance of this preference" (p. 128).

Louisiana adopted the federal definitions for placements and published specific guidelines for determining the placement based on time out of general education classes. The systems change grant ended in 1998. In the context of these state and national changes, the time is opportune to re-examine Louisiana's data on the placement of students with disabilities.

The current study follows up and extends the 1997 study by posing three research questions:

1) Has significant change in the number of students in general education, resource or separate placements occurred from 1990 to 1999?

2) Have the significant differences in placements by age category continued?

3) Which school systems show a tendency toward more or less inclusion of students and how do they compare on identified variables?

Methodology

Definitions

Special education, possibly more than general education, has a language of its own. For the purposes of this paper, inclusive is viewed as educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms. There is no differentiation between what is viewed as inclusion, in which some students may receive some special education services outside the general education classroom, versus full inclusion, which is usually defined as all students spending all of the school day in general education. To ensure comparisons were made from the same basis, the following definitions were used:

Terms	Definitions
General education	Student with disabilities spends less than 21% of the school day outside general education.
Resource special education	Student with disabilities spends 21%, but no more than 60% of the school day outside general education.
Separate special education	Student with disabilities spends more than 60% of the day outside of general education.
Elementary aged	Students ages 6 to 11
Secondary aged	Students ages 12 to 17
Adult aged	Students ages 18 to 21

Data Sources

Student demographic data were generated from a statewide student database, using the federal reporting date of December 1 for comparison. Data for comparison of school district variables were obtained from the following sources: student membership and free and reduced lunch counts were taken from the student information system (SIS), an individual database of all students in Louisiana public schools; count of students with disabilities was taken from the Louisiana Network of Special Education Records (LANSER), an individual student database for special education; average school performance scores were downloaded from the accountability data reported on the Department of Education website. This study was limited to school aged students, thus, for students with disabilities data for the age range of six to 21 were used. Other data were obtained from Louisiana's *150th Annual Financial and Statistical Report* for 1998-99.

Analysis

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test for significance, with $p < .05$ signifying significant differences. For question three, data tables were generated for percent of students in general education and in special education for the last three years (1997, 1998, 1999). The greater the percent of students in general education, the more inclusive the district. The greater the percent of students in separate or self-contained special education placements the less inclusive the district.

Variables for school district comparison were identified, in part, from the literature on change, in part, because of the continuing belief these variables make a difference, and, in part, because of their importance in the special education literature. Variables identified for the eight districts were -

1) school district size or membership,
2) economic status as measured by percent of students on free and reduced lunch,
3) percent of school district membership identified as disabled;
4) placement by disability category, and
5) average school system performance score for elementary and middle schools.

Results

Question one asked whether there were significant differences in placements over the ten-year period. Just as in the 1997 study, no significant differences were found. These data show that the gradual decline in general education placements that was previously found shifted slightly upward in 1996 and1997, with an almost 5% decrease in 1998, then a more than 8% increase in 1999. Table 1 shows the percent of students in each placement. Yet, even with these shifts, general education placements in 1999 are only slightly more than 1% greater than in 1990.

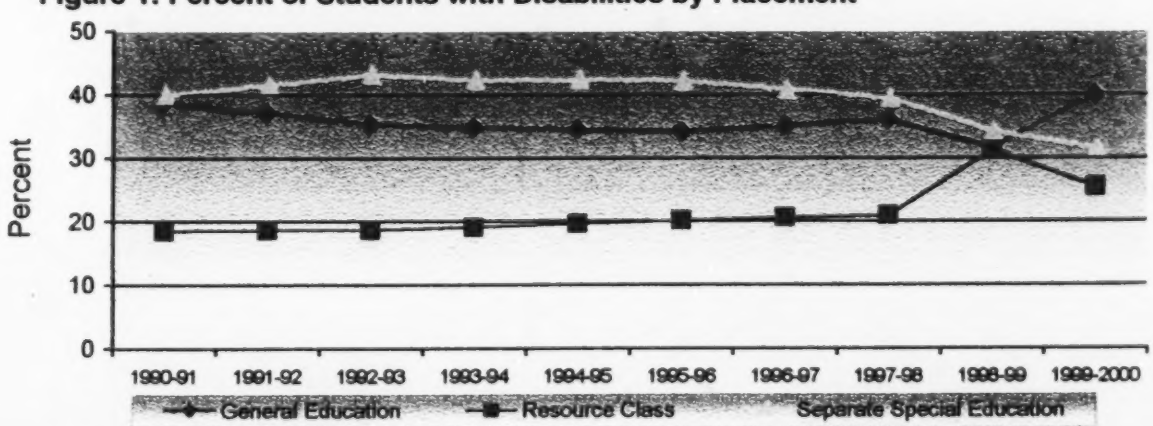
Table 1: Comparison of Percent of Students by Placement by Year*

Year	General Education Class	Resource Special Education Class	Separate Special Education Class
1990 (n=63,377)	38.76%	18.41%	39.97%
1991 (n=67,582)	37.19%	18.63%	41.62%
1992 (n=69,876)	35.40%	18.63%	43.24%
1993 (n=75,849)	34.92%	19.06%	42.36%
1994 (n=79,053)	34.52%	19.63%	42.41%
1995 (n=81,472)	34.25%	20.18%	42.29%
1996 (n=83,277)	35.15%	20.65%	40.93%
1997 (n=84,690)	36.21%	21.00%	39.54%
1998 (n=85,750)	31.74%	31.28%	34.28%
1999 (n=86,667)	39.98%	25.42%	31.59%

*Note: Figures do not add to 100% because all placements are not reported in this table.

Although statistical significance was not reached, practical differences can be noted beginning in 1998. That year the percent of students in general education and separate special education class decreased (-10%) in proportion to the increase (+10%) in resource special education placements. In 1999, data indicate that general education placements increased to the highest level in the ten-year period, while self-contained placements decreased to the lowest level in ten years. Resource special education placements, while decreased from 1998 were higher than at any time from 1990-97. Figure 1 dramatically illustrates the variations during the last two years.

Figure 1: Percent of Students with Disabilities by Placement



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Question two asked whether there are significant differences when placement by age categories is examined. Figure 2 shows the majority of general education placements are elementary aged students; while most secondary and adult aged students are placed in separate special education classes. These differences continue to be significant.

Even though the patterns of placements by age category are fairly stable and consistent through 1997, changes began in 1998. That year the percent of secondary and adult aged students placed in general education dropped sharply. There was a drop in the percent of students in separate special education for all ages. The percent of students placed in resource special education more than doubled for secondary and adult aged students with increases for elementary aged students also noticeable.

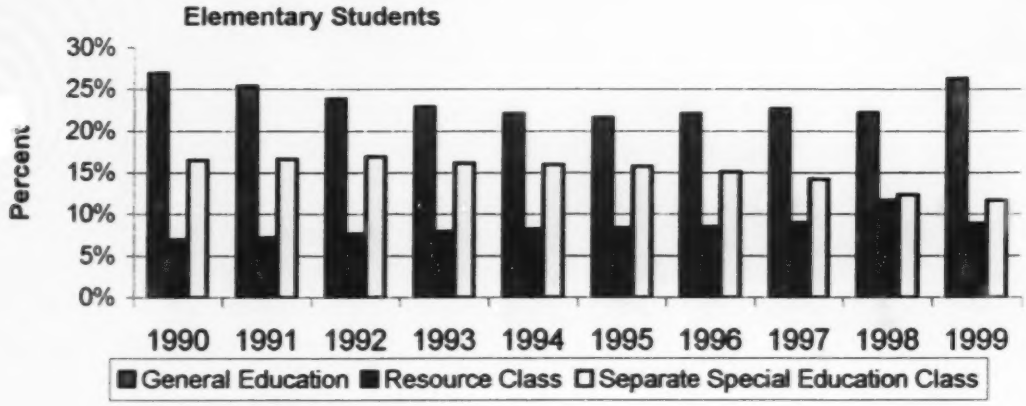
Data for 1999, on the other hand, show an increase in the percent of students in general education for all ages and decrease in the percent of students in resource and separate special education for all ages. In terms of placement patterns, general education placements almost matched the all time high for elementary, reached an all time high for secondary students, while separate special education placements were at an all time low for all age categories.

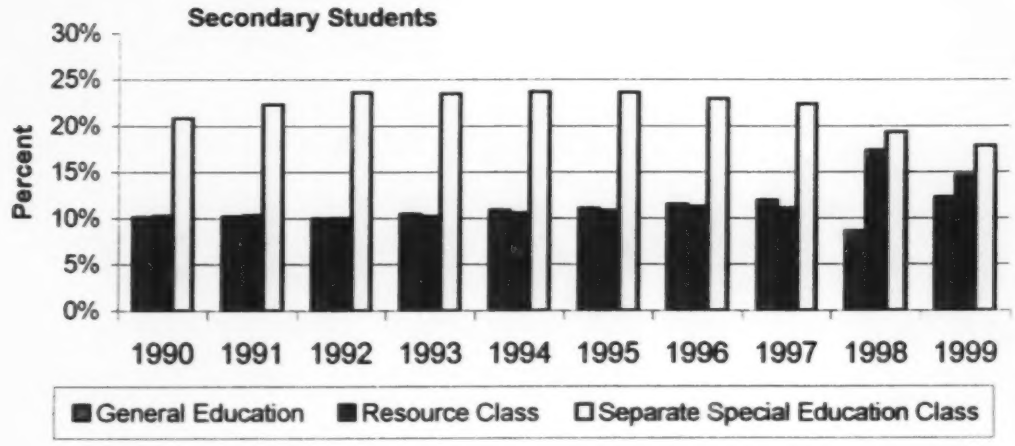
The 1997 study also looked at whether there were significant differences in placements within the age categories. In other words, of all elementary aged students what is the percent in general education? Table 2 provides this comparison. The ANOVA showed significant differences among all placements within the elementary age category. Significant differences are evident between general education and separate placements and resource and separate placements for secondary and adult aged students. These results are consistent with the previous study.

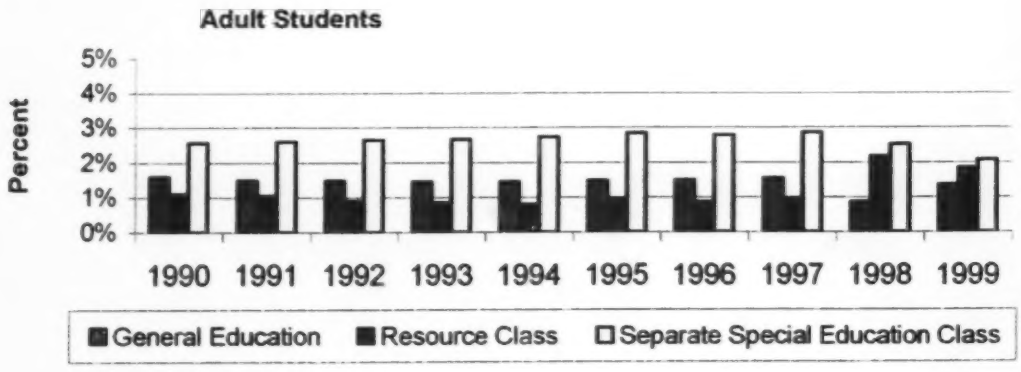
Table 2: Comparison of Percent of Students by Age Category by Placement

	Elementary Aged			Secondary Aged			Adult Aged		
	GE	RS	SC	GE	RS	SC	GE	RS	SC
1990	52.5	13.7	32.2	23.9	24.2	48.9	26.6	18.2	43.1
1991	50.8	14.4	33.2	23.1	23.4	50.5	26.7	18.7	46.6
1992	48.4	15.6	34.4	22.2	22.2	52.2	27.4	16.4	49.0
1993	47.9	16.6	33.7	22.6	22.1	50.7	25.8	15.0	47.8
1994	47.0	17.5	33.9	23.1	22.4	50.1	26.1	14.3	49.6
1995	46.6	18.0	33.9	23.3	22.8	49.7	25.5	16.0	49.2
1996	47.6	18.2	32.6	24.1	23.7	48.1	26.4	15.1	49.2
1997	48.8	19.3	30.6	25.1	23.4	47.1	26.1	15.5	48.9
1998	47.5	25.0	26.5	18.3	37.0	41.1	14.2	35.7	41.6
1999	55.5	18.8	24.6	26.3	31.4	38.3	23.4	31.5	35.4

Figure 2: Comparison across Placements







Question three led to an examination of school district level data. School districts were first ranked based on the percent of students in general education from most to least inclusive. The second ranking was based on the percent of students in separate class placements. This resulted in ordering school districts from most to least restrictive. Each district was assigned a rank on the inclusive and restrictive scale and compared over a three-year period. Using an across time perspective strengthened the reliability of the identification.

This first review resulted in an initial identification of 10 districts in the most inclusive category and nine in the least. The second iteration made by comparing districts' ranks over time resulted in a clear identification of four school districts as "most inclusive" and four as "least inclusive." Table 3 below shows a side by side comparison.

Table 3: Comparison of Percent of Students in General Education and Separate Special Education Class Placements

Most Inclusive	1997	1998	1999	Least Inclusive	1997	1998	1999
M1	91.4%	95.8%	95.8%	L1	65.6%	65.8%	62.4%
M2	53.2%	90.2%	93.0%	L2	62.1%	60.4%	59.3%
M3	47.9%	63.8%	72.8%	L3	60.2%	54.4%	51.0%
M4	36.8%	61.9%	70.1%	L4	57.5%	58.7%	53.2%

Note that the most inclusive school districts show a tendency to become more inclusive over time and the least inclusive school districts show a slight tendency toward decreasing the separate placements. However, becoming less restrictive within the context of the definition used in this paper, does not lead naturally to the conclusion that they are becoming more inclusive. It can also be seen that the percent of students in separate special education class placements varies less than 10 points from L1 to L4; whereas, the difference in the percent of students in general education from M1 to M4 is approximately 25 points.

Variables chosen for comparing the eight school districts were 1) student membership, 2) percent of students on free and reduced lunch, 3) percent of students classified as disabled, 4) district placement patterns for students with mental disabilities, learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, and speech impairments, and 5) average district performance scores. The first four variables use a straightforward comparison and/or calculation; district performance was more difficult to calculate.

A district performance score was computed using the average of the school performance scores calculated as part of Louisiana's accountability plan. Although school performance scores are only generated for elementary and secondary students, it was decided that as an entry-level variable this would be acceptable. For this comparison, the 1998-99 school year was used in order to assure that all data were available; the Louisiana Department of Education compiles and reports school and district performance data in the Fall. In recent years data have been available in late September; however, because Spring 2000 was the first year of full implementation of a

new accountability and testing program, there was concern about whether data for the 1999-2000 school year would be available.

Table 4 shows the rank of each of the eight districts on four of the variables examined. There are 66 city or parish school districts in Louisiana. A rank of one (1) means the district has the greatest or highest amount of the variable measured when compared to the other districts, whereas 66 would be the smallest or lowest. As noted in Table 4, M1 is smaller in student population with a rank of 59 than L1, which has the greatest student population and rank of 1.

Table 4: Comparison by Rank on Selected Variables

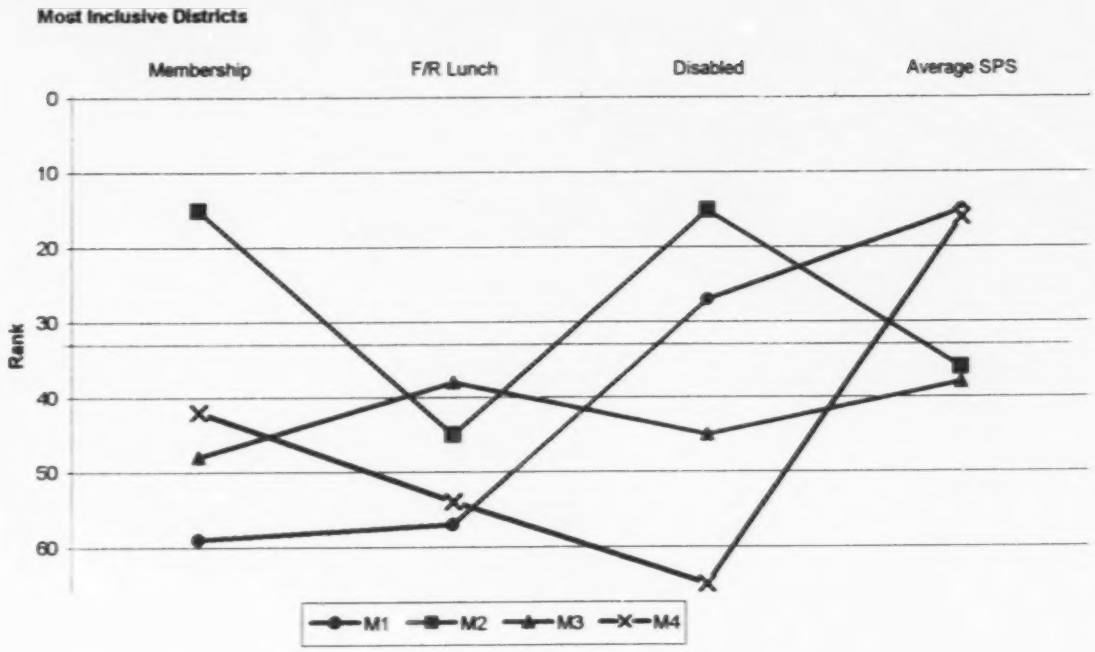
	Student Membership	Free/Reduced Lunch	Students classified with Disability	Average School Performance Score
M1	59	57	27	15
M2	15	45	15	36
M3	48	38	45	38
M4	42	54	65	16
L1	1	14	60	66
L2	3	24	10	42
L3	19	11	51	57
L4	35	35	36	45

Figure 3 graphically compares the districts on these variables. The comparison indicates a tendency in least inclusive districts (three of the four school districts) to greater student population, a higher proportion of students on free and reduced lunch, and below average school performance (four of four). Conversely, there is a tendency in the most inclusive districts toward lower student population (three of four school districts) and a smaller proportion of students on free and reduced lunch (four of the four districts) and above average school performance (two of the four).

School districts were also compared on placements of students with mental disabilities, learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, and speech impairments. The purpose of this examination was to determine whether the more or less inclusive tendencies seemed to be a general pattern for students with disabilities or more specific to certain disabilities.

Figures 4.1-4.4 compare the most inclusive to least inclusive districts by disability category. On the whole the patterns of inclusion of the least inclusive districts are a direct inverse of those of the most inclusive districts. The notable exception is for students with speech impairments; for these students placements are more similar.

Figure 3: Comparison on Selected Variables



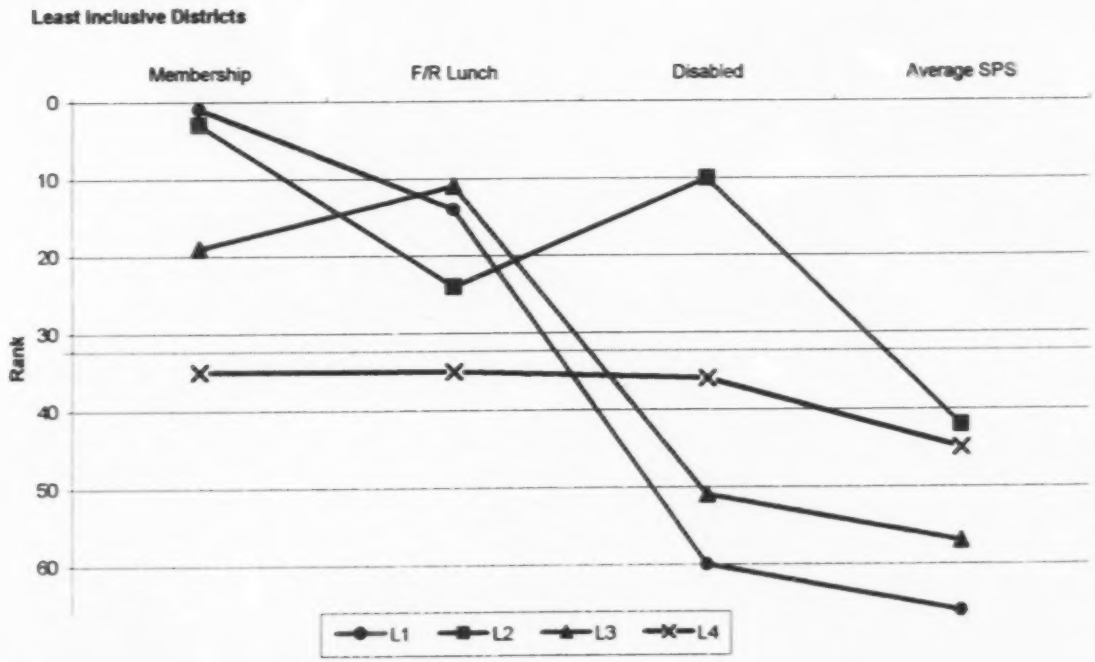


Figure 4.1: Comparison of Placements for Students with Mental Disabilities

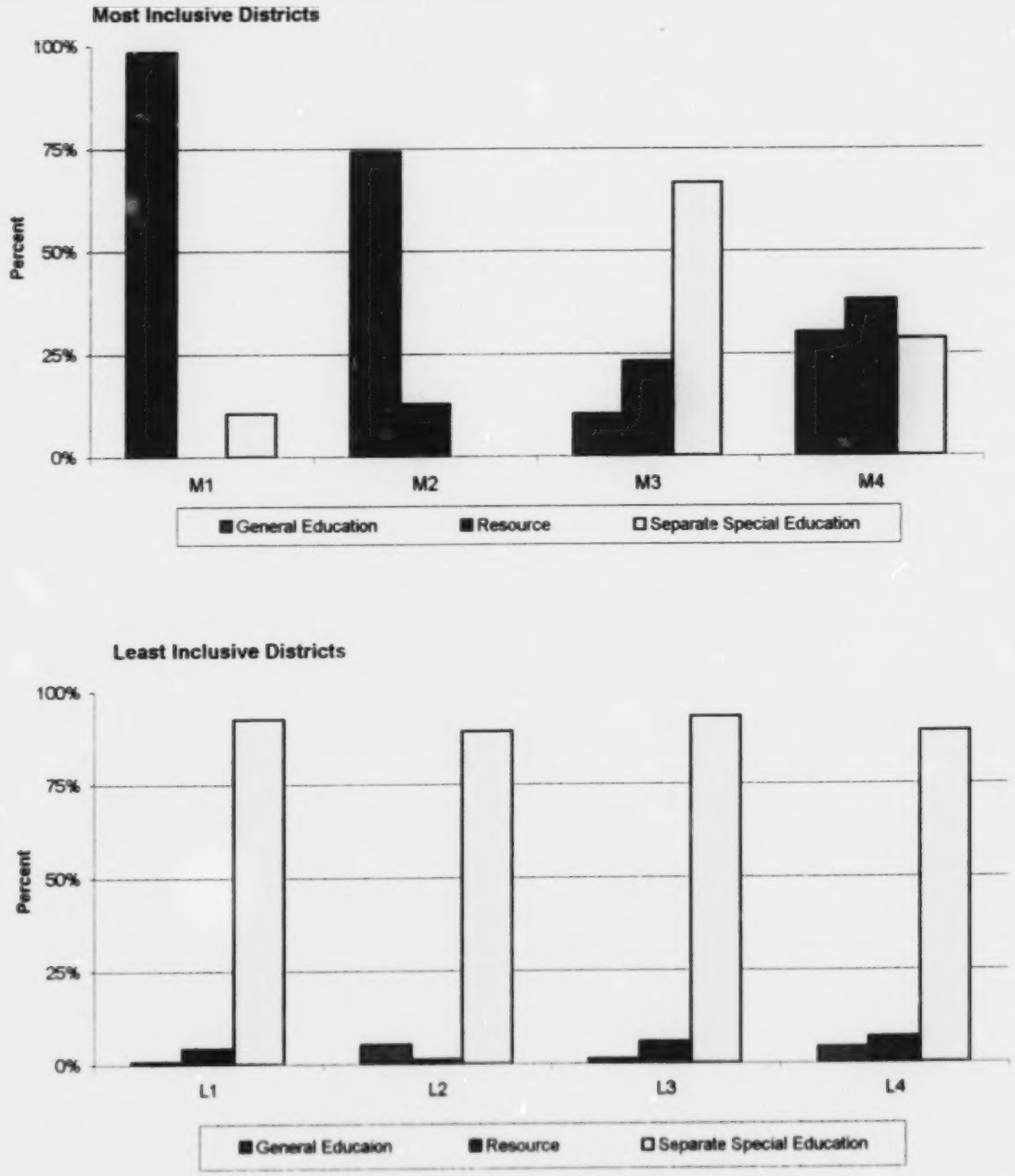
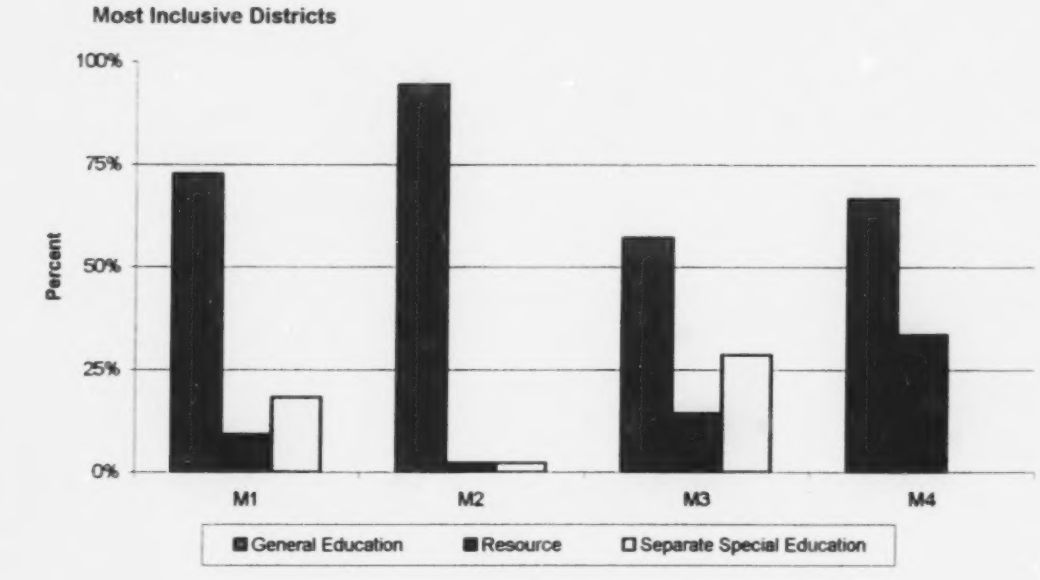


Figure 4.3: Comparison of Placements for Students with Emotional Disturbance



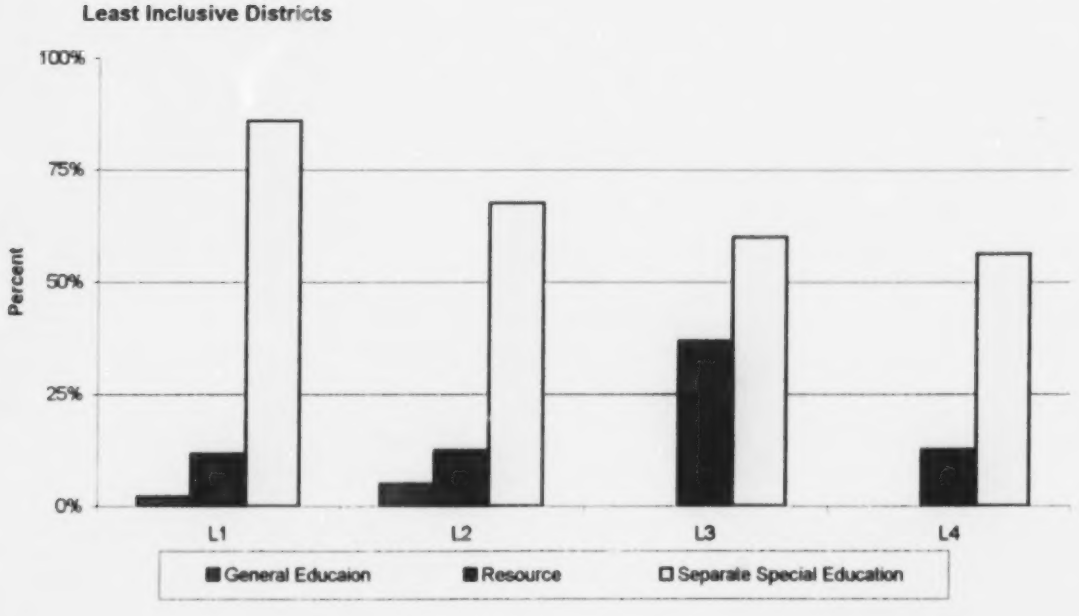
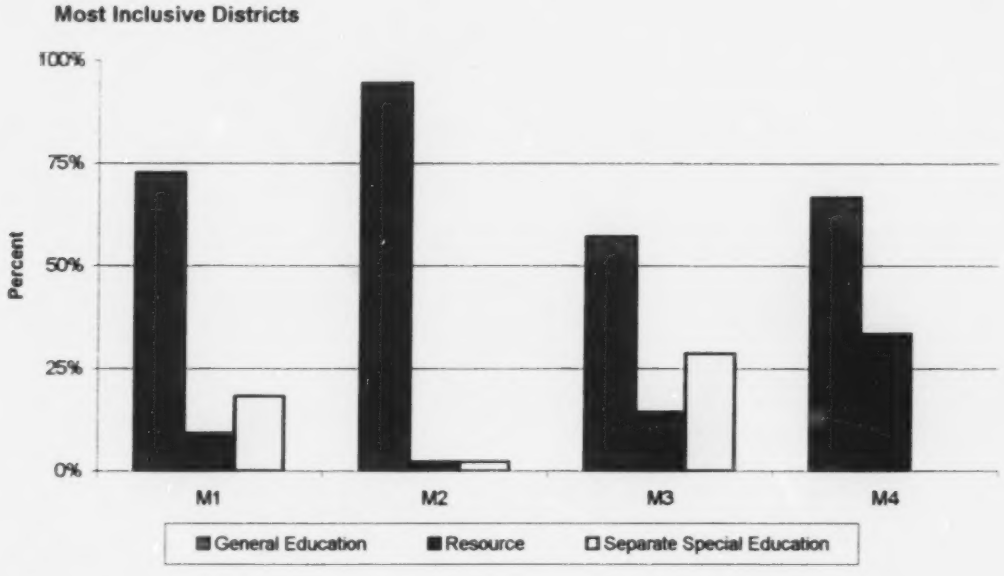


Figure 4.3: Comparison of Placements for Students with Emotional Disturbance



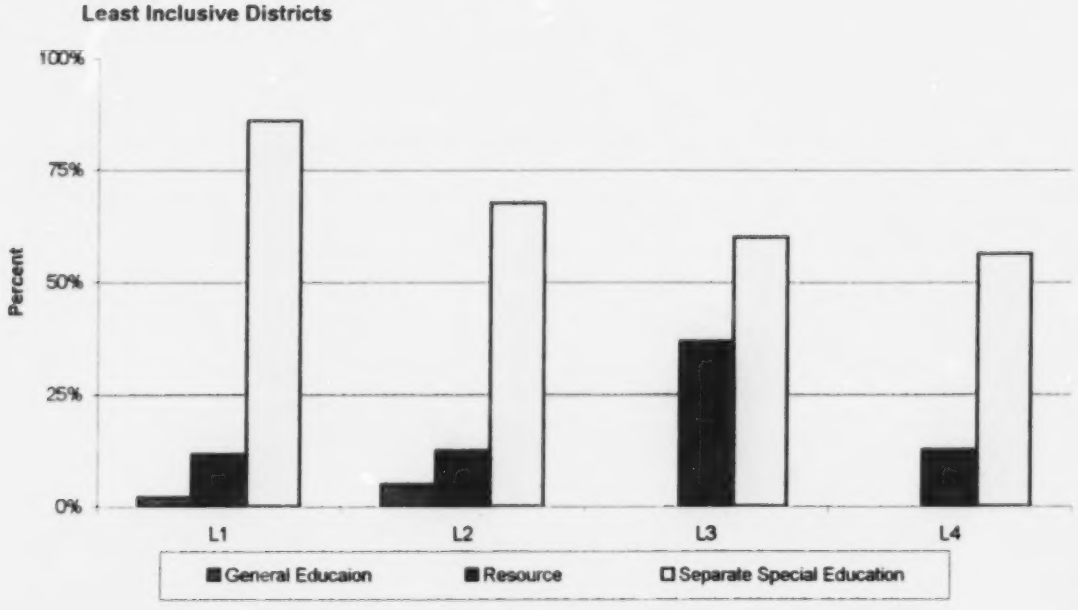
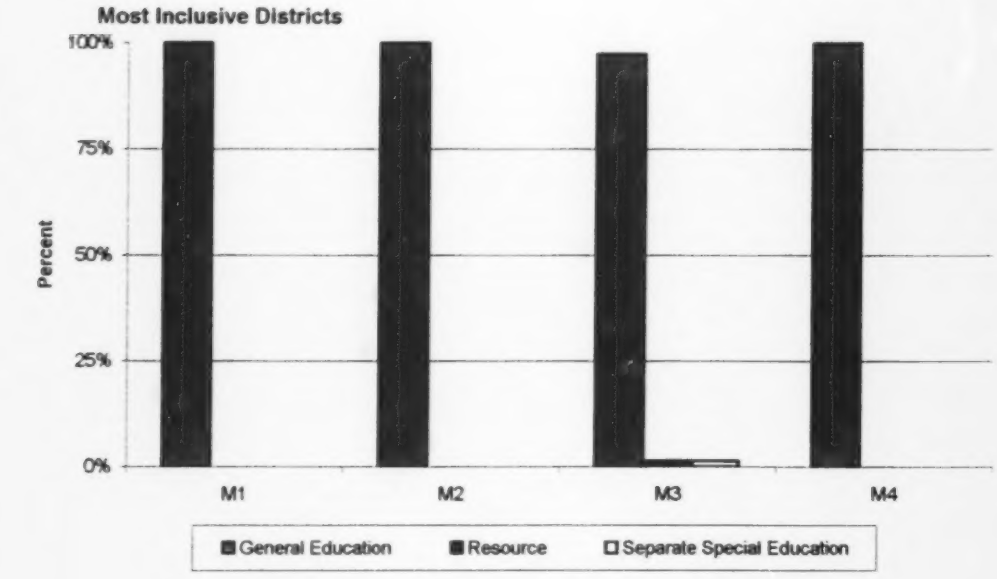
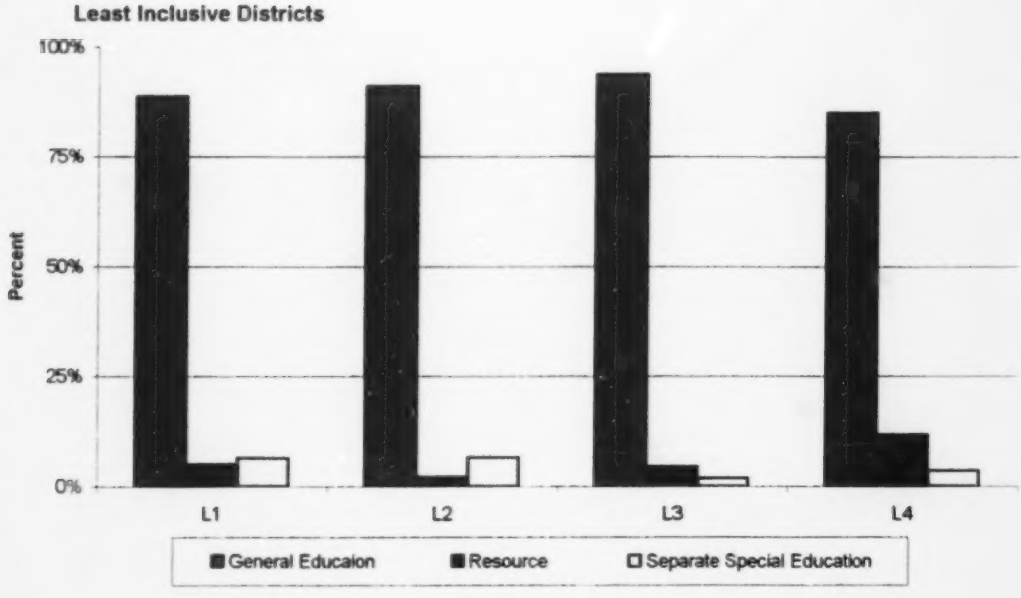


Figure 4.4: Comparison of Placements for Students with Speech Impairments





Although not originally identified as variables for examination, three additional district level variables, specific to the eight identified districts, were examined because of their recurring prominence in the school literature. These variables were per pupil expenditures, education level of teachers, and average teacher salary. Table 5 shows the comparison.

Table 5: Comparison on Per Pupil Expenditures, Faculty Education, and Average Teacher Salary

	Per Pupil Expenditures	Percent of Faculty with Master's Degree or Above	Average Salary of Full Time Teachers
M1	$8,070	55%	$35,465
M2	$5,556	30%	$30,990
M3	$5,124	28%	$28,469
M4	$5,080	28%	$25,999
L1	$5,453	40%	$38,167
L2	$6,009	39%	$33,688
L3	$5,225	49%	$30,400
L4	$6,381	38%	$32,371

These variables indicate that, on the whole, per pupil expenditures are about the same, the percent of faculty with a graduate degree is actually higher overall in the least inclusive districts as is salary. It can be noted that the most inclusive district does have the highest per pupil expenditures and faculty with higher degrees.

Discussion

Having reported the results, what do they mean? It seems that with the federal and state level changes during 1997 and 1998, changes in placement patterns did occur. Figure 1 dramatically portrays an increase in general education placements and decrease in separate special education placements. Yet, there is an equally dramatic increase in resource placements in 1998, only to be followed by a decline in 1999.

The first explanation of these results is the implementation by Louisiana of federal definitions for determining placements. As was noted in the 1997 report, using the percent of time outside general education revealed a gradual decrease in general education, increase in resource class, and increase in separate special education placement. These results mirror those found in this study for 1998, the first year the federal definitions were implemented.

Regression to the mean or the search for homeostasis could somewhat explain the 1999 data, as the placements begin to look more like previous years. Yet, the positive signs are that even with these "regressions," general education placements are the highest and separate special education placements the lowest in ten years.

Data comparing placements across age categories provide a picture that is essentially unchanged over the ten-year period. The data within age categories show some movement toward more inclusion of elementary and secondary students in general education and reduced placements in separate special education. The most notable change for adult aged students is the increase in resource placements. It continues to be true that as students with disabilities age, placements become more restrictive.

It could be speculated that the federal emphasis on all students addressing the general education curriculum and being included in statewide assessments has provided an impetus toward more inclusion. In Louisiana, accountability has received an increased emphasis with the move toward greater accountability and high stakes testing. This may especially be a factor at the elementary level where the reasoning may be that placing more students in general education will prepare them for the high stakes tests in fourth grade.

Some support for this speculation lies in reports on the benefits of inclusion. Mara Sapon-Shevin said,

> Inclusion will succeed to the extent that it links itself with other ongoing restructuring efforts with the detracking movement, authentic assessment, site-based management, and so on. Restructuring means looking at not just what kind of classrooms we want, but what kind of a world we want, and how we prepare children to be members of that broader community (O'Neil, J., 1994, p. 12).

Thousand and Villa (1995) wrote, "Inclusive schooling has been linked with and has strengthened and been strengthened by other Vermont education initiatives (e.g., the development of *Vermont's Common Core of Learning*, portfolio assessment, and New American Schools)" (p. 391).

Support for this view can also be found in the *Summary of Systemic Findings* by the Division of Special Populations, Louisiana Department of Education. From on-site monitoring during 1999-2000, in the review of placement and statewide testing, they reported, " Systems with the highest number of students in regular class placement were found to have the most success with students participating in the general curriculum" (p. 2). Further they found when examining the placement indicator data, "The [monitoring] teams noted that overwhelmingly systems with higher numbers in regular class settings or resource settings had a higher incidence rate of students exiting with a high school diploma, participating in regular assessment, and passing/scoring higher on the LEAP [Louisiana Educational Assessment Program]" (p. 3).

On the other hand, the increase of secondary and adult aged students in resource placements may be an outgrowth of the increased emphasis on transition services. Because transition must be addressed beginning when students are age 14,

the increase in the resource and general education placements during the last two years may be in reaction to providing greater opportunities for interaction with nondisabled peers to increase academic and social skills.

However, these possibilities are purely speculative. Further results show placements continue to become more restrictive as children age. In fact, the average percent of children in general education for the past ten years is 49.3% at the elementary level and only 24.8% in the adult age category. This is little different than reported in 1997.

It was, of course, a hopeful outcome that examining and comparing school district data would provide insights into why some districts are more inclusive. While the tendencies noted - smaller size, fewer students on free and reduced lunch, and higher average performance - provide possible implications, they are not overwhelmingly indicative. The district placement does indicate that more inclusive districts are inclusive for *all* students, while the least inclusive districts are less inclusive for *all* students. Inclusion does not seem to be disability category specific with the exception of students with speech impairments, who are usually placed in general education.

Finally, the variables of money and faculty education failed to point out distinguishing differences. In fact, it was rather disconcerting that neither money nor education variables seemed to be related to the inclusiveness of the districts.

The exception is the most inclusive district (M1). This district has been committed to inclusion since the early 1990's; yet even with that commitment, Table 3 shows an increase of more than 4% in general education placements in the last two years. This is the smallest of the most inclusive districts, has the smallest population of students on free and reduced lunch, and highest average performance score. It also has the highest per pupil expenditures and percent of staff with an advanced degree.

The second most inclusive district (M2), dramatically increased general education placements over the last two years, even though this district has had a stated commitment to inclusion since becoming a part of the systems change project in the mid 1990's. This district is rather large with a medium proportion of students on free and reduced lunch and slightly below average school performance.

Conclusions

Change is slow. This ten-year perspective shows no dramatic shifts in placement trends in Louisiana. While the saying, *the more things change, the more they remain the same* may be a premature description of the placement trends in Louisiana in the future, Louisiana's ranking nationally in the *Twenty-first Report to Congress* (2000 for the 1996-97 school year showed only four states and the District of Columbia having a smaller percent of students in general education placements. This would seem to be about the same - forty-fifty - rank found in 1989 and again in 1992.

Comparing the average percent of students in the three placements over the last four years to the previous six, shows no real change in general education placements, an approximate 5% decrease in separate special education class placements with a subsequent 5% increase in resource special education class placements. This indicates there has been change, albeit in smaller increments than presumed or desired and not in all areas. Whether these changes are of actual importance or fluctuations because of regulatory definition changes is uncertain.

The data across age placements show that on average the state has only slightly more students in general education and only slightly fewer students in separate special education than four years ago. Also the tendency to increase separate placements as students age continues to be clearly evident.

The positive note is the district level examination. While conclusive indicators did not emerge, the concept of commitment did. Both the first and second most inclusive districts were examined in the 1997 study. As the data in the current study indicate, the most inclusive district has committed to greater inclusion than the other districts, committed more money per pupil and has a high percent of advanced degree staff. In addition, it has above average performance scores. The second most inclusive district has stated a commitment to inclusion, was part of the systems change project, yet as the percent of general education placements indicate has greatly increased in inclusiveness during the last two years.

In a study of organizational change, the American Productivity and Quality Center listed five key elements to successful organizational change. First on the list is "committed and active participation of leadership." Second is "culture change" defined as "the collective attitudes and behaviors embodied in an organization's workforce ... Culture change facilitates other change by making the work force more comfortable with and receptive to organizational change" (1997,p. 2). Along the same lines, Thousand and Villa noted, that in Vermont with 83% of the state's students with disabilities in general education, educators and policy makers identified five key factors: "1) administrative support, 2) the development of commitment on the part of instructional staff, 3) a means for getting specialized expertise into the classroom, 4) a process for collaboratively planning and teaming, and 5) a systematic transition-planning process" (1995, p. 289).

Given the study results and the concept of commitment, the next steps are to go to the districts. District level examinations and comparisons are needed to answer such questions as, what factors might account for the commitment to inclusion? Does impetus for the move toward greater inclusion originate from the school or central administrative level? Are there variations within the districts by school? At the same time as an examination of the most inclusive districts is conducted, the least inclusive districts need to be examined and comparisons made. For example, are there degrees of inclusiveness within the most and least inclusive districts? Are patterns of faculty interactions different in schools in the most inclusive and least inclusive districts?

In 1997, Durrett and Luster stated in their conclusion, "This study has actually raised as many questions as it has answered. It does, however, provide a baseline from which Louisiana can plan and begin to answer the questions raised" (p. 11). Again this conclusion could be stated; however, from that baseline period, some shift has occurred and the first period of intervention has been noted. The next steps are to continue the longitudinal examination while examining more closely specific factors that seem to increase the likelihood of inclusion of students with disabilities into general education placements.

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